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ABSTRACT

Some failure types that occur in cross-cultural interactions are described, mainly from the point of view of Finns and Finland and from primarily anecdotal and "folk theoretical" data. Material from such sources as newspapers, joke collections, proverbs, and student experiences are used as the basis of the discussion. Non-grammatical errors, or the errors concerned with the breakdown of conversational rules or nonverbal behavior, are seen to compromise a speaker more than grammatical or lexical errors. Anecdotal evidence is presented to illustrate difficulties in cross-cultural communication resulting from negative attitudes and unfavorable stereotypes, although it is suggested that stereotyping is not inherently negative because it helps organize bits of information and attitudes of all kinds that are embedded in every situation. The complexities of interpretation are noted, as are non-native pronunciation difficulties when the speaker inadvertently uses a taboo expression (e.g., "impotent" rather than "important"). Similarly, problems related to interlingual taboo words in advertising or trade names are discussed. Other classes of language errors are considered, including clumsy translations, odd spellings of a foreign language, discourse problems such as temporal patterns of communication, nonverbal problems such as those dealing with proximity, and social errors related to eating, drinking, and sanitation. Contains 24 references. (LB)

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# INNOCENTS ABROAD: THE POLITICS OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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"Every day is a dawn of new error."

Although it may be difficult to determine what successful communication is like, the opposite seems to be readily recognized. Failures are recognized - and remembered. Failures occur in conversations between two native speakers, and there are various kinds of interaction slips that colour the dullness of everyday interactions (see Heikkinen and Valo 1985). However, it seems that errors, slips and blunders are felt to be especially discriminating in cross-cultural communication.

In this paper I discuss some failure types that occur in cross-cultural interactions, mainly from the point of view of Finns and Finland. My data is largely anecdotal and "folk-theoretical". I have collected material from various sources: newspaper items, collections of jokes, proverbs and so on. I also asked students on some of my courses (during spring 1990) to recollect cross-cultural failures of their own. I also discuss the relevance of such material and its indications to cross-cultural research.

Foreign language errors, ie. *grammatical* or *lexical* ones, have been analyzed quite thoroughly, and much data has been collected in error analysis projects (a bibliographical survey in eg. Palmberg 1980). At present, however, it is more and more readily acknowledged that language errors, in many cases, do not really matter. That is, the linguistic frame is really too narrow in the description of cross-cultural communication failures. Both native speakers and foreign language learners make mistakes: some of them are socially awkward, some not. Although some grammatical mistakes and foreign accents may be felt "intellectually inferior" or "funny", it seems that there is a class of errors which is socially more dramatic. *Non-grammatical* errors, or the errors concerned with

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breakdown of conversational rules or nonverbal behaviour seem to compromise the speaker as a person and they carry a different name: blunders or gaffes.

The cross-cultural communication situation is often delicate. The participants are not equal when using the native language of one of the participants. The native speaker typically knows more, and is more skilled in the use of language. S/he has a more dominant role in the situation. This far, foreign language learning and cross-cultural communication have been studied primarily from the point of view of learner, or foreigner. It can be strongly suggested, however, that cross-cultural communication should not be studied solely from this point of view. The role of the native speaker (or the observer/the addressee) should not be neglected. Cross-cultural interaction is a two-way process, and it involves mutual understanding - or misunderstanding (see eg. Viljanen-Saira 1986).

Although it is difficult to outline the elements of successful cross-cultural communication, some rough suggestions can be made. It is important to the participants to give each other a positive impression of oneself as a person, as a representative of a certain group or organization, and as a representative of one's own culture. If both participants aim at not losing one's own face and not making the other lose it, the result is satisfactory. In the following I discuss some reasons why this may be difficult.

Love thy neighbour?

First, cross-cultural communication may be difficult, because there exist so many negative attitudes and unfavourable stereotypes towards people from other cultures (for a general discussion of cultures and their evaluation see eg. Pesonen 1986; Alho et al. 1989). Stereotyping as such is not to be seen as a negative phenomenon: it simply helps us to organize bits of information and attitudes of all kinds are embedded in every situation (see eg. Allwood ed. 1988).

One's own culture is usually positively evaluated: people usually have both strong positive linguistic and cultural identity.

M oon meilt, muut on meirn krannista.

is a Finnish proverb that sums up this feeling: the centre of existence is where we live, and other people are outsiders and maybe inferior as well. But it is not unusual that people have negative attitudes to their own language and culture either.

Finns are the most civilized barbarians of Europe.

goes a more modern Finnish saying, implying that Finns do have some feelings of inferiority in rapidly integrating Europe. In fact, some studies give support to the idea that poor self-confidence might be typical for Finns (see Daun 1989).

Similarly, other cultures are also either positively or negatively scaled. For example, Finns tend to admire Western European or Anglo-American cultures and adapt cultural loans and imitate their cultural sphere. "Civilized" countries or "civilized" languages , for a Finn, imply almost without an exception a Western European country or language (see Dufva et al 1989).

Negative attitudes towards other cultures, unfortunately, seem to be common as well. In Finland, as well as in Western Europe, Eastern cultures and races have been noted as inferior.

Ryss on ryss vaikka sen voissa paistais.

was a popular saying in Finland from the 1920's on, and states that you cannot make a Russian any better even if you fried him in butter. The anti-Russian feelings in Finland have probably several sources: general ideas about racial inferiority as well as later social and political confrontations (see eg. Immonen 1988; Luostarinen 1986).

The dislike of other cultures is naturally related to their social and political power. More powerful cultures can be felt (often with good reason) as a threat, and smaller cultures, especilly minorities, are either ignored or suppressed.

Suosi suomalaista, potki pakolaista.

is, supposedly, a joke, but as a print on a T-shirt front it took its Finnish vendor to court. The official refugee policy of Finland disapproved of the sentiment "Buy Finnish, beat the refugee" slogan.

The negative attitudes towards other nations and language have always flourished. Here are some examples that I have picked from different sources:

> I am willing to love all mankind, except an American. (Samuel Johnson)
>
> The German mind has a talent for making no mistakes but the very greatest. (Clifton Fadiman)
>
> After shaking hands with a Greek, count your fingers. (Albanian proverb)
>
> Fight world hunger - feed Iranians to Cambodians. (Graffiti)

Close cultural encounters of various kinds

If different nations do have such notions of each other, it easy to see that negative stereotypes are one reason for difficulties in cross-cultural encounters.

It is true that situations of cross-cultural communication can be very different. For example, it may be an individual encounter. Missionaries, anthropologists, journalists, tourists, businessmen, peace corps workers and so on may encounter a whole culture as an individual (an introduction into cross-cultural face-to-face communication in eg. Brislin 1981). From the individual point of view the (negative) results of such encounters can be classified as errors, slips, blunders, misunderstandings, mistakes and so on (examples discussed in Thomas 1983; Thomas 1984).

When societies meet, or cultures clash, the situation is rather different. Wars, crusades, explorations, colonialism are examples of wider encounters and not necessarily positive ones. These encounters have traditionally lead to language deaths and culture deaths, but also to actual language and culture murders. This is a concept used by eg. Aikio (1988) for the situation of Sami people in Northern Finland. It is not uncommon for a culture to commit cultural suicide either: people may reject their own heritage and trade it for the majority culture.

Of course, cultures can co-operate. Nevertheless, recent examples have shown that the problems of multinational and multilingual societies (such as in Soviet Union, for example) can not be belittled.

However, cross-cultural encounters have been studied mostly from the point of the individual (see eg. Metsl 1988): this is also the point of view of this paper. When two individuals of different cultures and/or languages meet, it is probable that some problems occur. The resulting problems can, however, be caused by both the native and the foreigner alike; it is wrong to attribute the errors to the foreigner only.

Naive interpreters

In addition to naive speakers, there are also naive hearers or interpreters. In fact, misunderstandings, (or hearer's errors) seem to be rather common, although they are relatively little discussed of (see eg. Bredella and Haack 1988). For example, people often have difficulties in interpreting certain accents or varieties, although they might be familiar with the language as such. In Finland, for example, the Swedish that is taught at school is the Finland-Swedish variety, widely different in pronunciation from the Swedish as spoken in Sweden. That causes problems of interpretation.

A Finnish young man is hitch-hiking in Finland. A car driven by a Swede stops and gives him a ride. The Finn tries to keep up a polite conversation in Swedish, but has great difficulties understanding the accent of his interlocutor.

- Where do you live in Sweden? asks the Finn.
- Xbztswktynfgbmklm, answers the Swede, quite unintelligibly.
- And where in Sweden is that? asks the Finn.
- (Very clearly) STOCKHOLM? Don't you know where Stockholm is? But it is the capital of Sweden!!

The result of such trivial misunderstanding may be twofold. The Finn may think he has made a fool of himself, and the Swede may get the impression that Finns in general are very ignorant, or that geography is not taught at the Finnish school.

Similar difficulties of interpretation arise when one participant is not familiar with the discourse rules or nonverbal behaviour rules of the other one(s). One strategy that offers itself is that of imitation. An anecdote that is told about Calvin Coolidge should reveal its dangers, although it illustrates a difference between registers or formality degrees rather than a difference between cultures as such.

Calvin Coolidge was elected as the President of the United States, and he had his old friends from the country visiting him. The guests were somewhat timid, and they were imitating their host in order to do everything correctly. Coolidge poured some of his coffee on his saucer. His guests did the same. He poured some cream in and added also sugar. His friends did the same. And then - President Coolidge gave the coffee to his cat...

The correct interpretation of the seemingly odd, strange or foolish habits of foreigners is difficult. It is still more difficult to behave in a manner they do. Consequently, people commit all kinds of errors both in their verbal productions, discourse patterns, on verbal behaviour and social manners. These errors are discussed below.

Language problems

Do language errors really matter? It seems rather obvious that people do not feel a sense of failure very deeply, if they happen to use a wrong case ending in Finnish or choose a wrong word order for an English phrase. In fact, when I asked my students about their cross-cultural failures, nobody reported a purely linguistic error. That is, although speakers of foreign languages make verbal errors, they rarely seem to think about them during sleepless nights: "Oh bother! I used partitive instead of genitive again!"

There is, however, a small group of verbal errors that seem to be memorable occasions for the hearers and sometimes also for the speaker, and that is when the speaker inadvertently stumbles on a taboo expression of the language in question. The results differ widely depending on the morals and sense of humour of the hearers.

For example, non-native pronunciation may lead to errors that either delight or despair the natives. *Sheets* may become *shits*, *peace* is heard as *piss*, or *third*, in a

typically Finnish pronunciation becomes, *turd*. *Important* men may, by the power of Finnish accent, turn into *impotent* ones. In Finland, an innocent foreigner has been heard to exclaim: "*Nain* eilen ensimmaisen kerran poroja!", when he only meant that he saw reindeers, not that he actually had sexual intercourse with them.

Lexical difficulties may arise from different sources. First, there are so-called interlingual taboo words. These are words or expressions that either in their written or pronounced form strongly resemble a taboo word in another language. This is something that the advertisers are (and also should be) very familiar with (see Aman 1982).

Aman (1982) gives certain trade names as examples. A French soft drink called *Pshitt* did not appeal to English-speaking audiences, and also the Dutch liqueur called *Fockinck* is judged to be a bit improper. A Finnish anecdote (not a verified one) tells about the exporters of a Finnish rye crisp, who tried to sell their product to United States as *Rape* (a nonsense word based on the adjective *rapea*, 'crisp'). Also a car product, wind-screen washer called *Superpiss* might not be a best-seller in English-speaking countries. Finnish speakers on the other hand, have been mildly amused by such trade name as *Rivo*, 'obscene'. The adolescents seem to be especially concerned with looking for "daring" connotations, and *Zanussi* products, for example, seem to amuse them because the name vaguely resembles a Finnish verb for sexual intercourse.

Tourist guides also seem to be very familiar with these interlingual taboos. Guides often, as a part of their story repertoire, warn the tourists against using certain expressions. For example, Finnish tourists in Italy are forbidden to say "Katso merta!", which means "Have a look at the sea!" since the words might remind Italians of taboo words of their language. Also, Finnish people, especially women, are told not to use the exclamative "Hui!" in Russian-speaking company, since the word strongly resembles the Russian word for the male sexual organ. A story tells that the name of a Finnish children's play, *Herra Huu*, 'Mister Huu', had to be changed for the same reason when it was staged in Leningrad.

Also many foreign personal names will be rapidly or unclearly pronounced by shy Finns for the same reason. The French Nobel prize winner in literature

called *Perse* (in Finnish 'arse') is little spoken of. *Helsingin Sanomat* also published an article of strange place names of (former) Eastern Germany titled *Paskassa asuu 140 ihmistä*, meaning literally *there are 140 inhabitants living in shit/Paska*. A living proof of the comic value of these kind of interlingual taboos is of course Jean-Piere Cusela, a role character of Vesa-Matti Loiri, a Finnish entertainer. For a Finn, this pseudo-French names implies both 'farting' and 'pissing'.

Cross-cultural accidents are also caused by the confusion of two L2 items. *Kokkare* 'dumpling' has been known to change to *kikkeli* 'prick', and *kypärä* 'children's hat' into *kyrpä* 'prick'. The result: dead silences...

Another class of language errors that seem to end up in collections of anecdotes (see eg. Blundell ed. 1981; Parsons 1969; Lederer 1989) or autobiographical sketches are the ambiguous and/or clumsy translations or odd spellings of a foreign language. Often they are found in written productions: menus, signs or directions. These "funny errors" will travel around and in most cases it is impossible to state their accuracy. A good one might be applied over and over again into new situations and locations just as anecdotes usually will.

> The manager has personally passed all the water served here. (An Acapulco hotel)
>
> Order now your summers suit. Because is big rush we will execute all customers in strict rotation. (A Jordan tailor's shop)
>
> Stuff only. (A pub in Jyväskylä)

Anecdotes are told also of incompetent professional interpreters. When President Carter visited Poland, he expressed a wish to get well acquainted with the Polish people. The interpreter, it is claimed, translated the polite utterance in more crude terms, and astonished the audience with the message that the President felt a strong carnal lust towards the people of Poland.

## Discourse problems

Discourse errors include violations of conversational and discourse rules, such as turn-taking, politeness, topics and so on. The selection and misselection of

speech act strategies and such has been studied (see Thomas 1983; Thomas 1984). The following example of native/non-native (Russian) conversation comes from Thomas (1984):

FS: What do you think of him?
NS: I can't say I was overenamoured.
FS: What do you mean by saying that?
NS: You shouldn't have asked if you didn't want to be told!!

The non-native speaker was seeking information, but the native speaker interpreted it as a challenge. Similarly, Finnish students report that their habit of asking monosyllabic "What?" questions in England has gained rapidly negative feedback, and taught them to ask questions in a more multisyllabic way.

The temporal patterns of conversation: its pauses, its speech rhythm and its turn-taking also cause troubles for Finnish speakers in many Western European countries. It may be that there are certain characteristics typical for Finnish speech. Longer pauses in turn-switching, or silent pauses instead of "filled" ones might be typical examples (see eg. Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1985). Finns, for example, seem to have a different idea of politeness than Germans or the English. Many students told they found it difficult to get a word edgewise into a German conversation, for example. They consider themselves polite when they patiently wait for their turn, while Germans consider them shy when they do not actively participate. This probably leads to a situation in which the German speaker resumes a still more dominant and - as he thinks- a more helpful role. The German speaks more, the Finn becomes more and more silent.

Addressing people correctly may also be difficult. Different countries, religions and groups have different ideas of what is polite and what is not. Conventions of writing down names differ and may cause further difficulties. In China, for example, the name that is written last is not the surname and not a polite term for address. A gentleman called Lo Win Hao will not be delighted if he is called Mr. Hao on a first meeting (Axtell 1988). People from countries that are used to free use of T pronouns (for example Swedish *du* and Finnish *sinä*) may think V pronouns (for example French *vous* and German *Sie*) rather stuffy. And conversely, V users consider the T users impolite.

The nationality issue may also cause problems of address. Some years ago it was difficult to know whether to call people of Estonia *Estonians* or *Soviet citizens*. Nowadays it would obviously be an insult to call them anything but *Estonian*. People of the British Isles also obviously take heed of certain national issues and Scots do not like to be called *English*. This national question may also involve certain difficulties in language choice. Finns, for example, may find it difficult to decide whether to use English or Swedish when they address Swedish people.

Topics are an old favourite of cross-cultural blunders. Certain types of guide-books for businessmen and travellers quite often explicitly warn against certain taboo topics (see eg. Axtell 1988; Aaltola, Harjula, Lagus ja Ruuskanen 1989). Politics, religion, minorities are naturally world-wide taboo areas. A Finnish student later noticed that she had made an awkward topic error when, at a Muslim dinner, she happily chattered about some "sweet little piggies" she had seen.

## Nonverbal problems

Contrary to common folk wisdom, nonverbal behaviour is not universal. Therefore its rules also cause misunderstandings and confusion. These are not necessarily errors. They might be simply features of one's own culture and language that are judged as funny or insulting by other cultures. Others might result from an inadequate interpretation of the other culture, and still others may be caused by the sheer awkwardness of being in an unfamiliar situation in an unfamiliar culture.

For example, the paralinguistic features (ie. features of vocal behaviour) of Finnish speech may seem rough or impolite to foreigners. Finnish smooth intonation contours and lack of word-final rising intonation are often interpreted as dull or even insulting. Speech rhythm is described as rugged: "Why were you quarrelling?" asked a German boy when he heard two Finnish girls having a normal friendly conversation.

Kinetic communication may be more difficult. Certain gestures, for example, may acquire a word-like status in a culture. They are known by most of the

speakers in the community, and they have a clear lexical interpretation. Unfortunately, these emblems are not universal. An American making his own OK gesture in Rio de Janeiro got an icy reception, since his gesture had an obscene reference in Brazil. And also, facial expressions, such as a smile, are used very differently in cultures. Postures are also widely different. For example, many popular magazines reported that Princess Diana had made a blunder sitting in a posture that revealed her shoe-soles in an Arabic country.

Differences in proxemic behaviour (especially touching) may evoke even panic reactions. More than one of my female Finnish students reported with horror that they had met Arab girls that wanted to walk hand in hand with them. An American businessman also had to think twice when his Arab colleague wanted to hold hands with him. And of course, the right proxemic rules between men and women are especially important and the problems of interpretation are many.

Finally, an area which also involves slips is the use of artefacts: what kind of clothes to wear, how to use make up and so on. It is widely known that Muslim countries forbid revealing dress for women, and tourist clothing may evoke considerable irritation in locals. *Helsingin Sanomat*, for example, (1 February 1990) tells us that although tourism is welcomed in Jordan, the leisure-wear of tourists is felt to cause moral deterioration among the natives.

It is well to respect local habits, but there are also dangers in "going native". It is better not to overdo. An American woman in Togo was reputed to have worn as a necklace a sort of a ribbon that the locals used to keep their loin cloth in its proper place. As she saw the amusement of the locals she realized it would be as funny to her if somebody would wear the elastic of her panties as a necklace (Axtell 1988).

Social errors

Social errors are such blunders that cannot be interpreted strictly in terms of linguistic or nonverbal communication errors. Many student problems seem to belong to this class. It is clear that at least for young students there are definite problem areas: food and drink is one of them.

Students, tourists and businessmen alike have many difficulties concerned with food and drink. There are various food and drink taboos. Ham is banned in muslim countries, as well as alcohol. It is also difficult to know whether one can turn down offers or not. Certain cultures presume that clients, for example, enjoy a cup of tea or a glass of wine before purchasing anything or making a business decision. It is difficult to know how much is polite, or how little is polite, whether it is suitable to leave food or drink left, and so on. Furthermore, table manners are a nuisance: must one use fingers, forks, or forks and knives? Must one eat with one's left hand or right hand? Even the order in which courses are eaten is different. Finnish students abroad feel particularly uncomfortable with salads and soups: are they eaten first or with the main course or after?

Drink is even more risky. Finnish girls, for example, do not have very strict "female drink" rules in their native country, and they may be surprised to notice that some British people consider pints of Guinness unsuitable for young ladies. Females in particular often consider carefully the eternal question: "Who pays the bill?". The habit of Finns to have separate bills for each person may also confuse their company, as well as their waiters and waitresses, in some countries.

Another area that offers many problems is "restroom behaviour". First, which is the polite way of referring to the place (and bodily functions) in question: is it a *restroom, bathroom, toilet, ladies/gents, powder room, loo, can, john* or what. The degrees of what is considered private and hygienic vary also quite a lot in different countries. Finnish students that are used to Scandinavian ideas of cleanliness, may experience unpleasant shocks even in France.

Different sex roles and interaction rules between males and females cause many errors of interpretation, although people are intuitively aware that these matters have to be handled with caution. For Northern European girls, for example, it is indeed difficult to realize that only female company in nocturnal Cairo is considered risky or that the eye-contact with Southern men may be interpreted as an invitation. On the other hand, Finnish young men, who are used to treating their girl friends on terms that they consider equal, may be considered impolite brutes by young ladies from elsewhere.

The fourth group of difficulties centers around the local customs: Finnish sauna may still be an embarrassing experience if the hosts do not realize that their guests might have different norms about nakedness or different ideas of comfortable degree of warmth.

The consequences

Above, I have dealt with largely anecdotal, and largely biassed data. The reports of slips, errors and blunders in these stories are nearly always seen from the point of view of one interactant only. It is extremely seldom that one finds the interpretation of both sides. In real life, errors, blunders and slips are never individual products. Every interaction is an interplay between the (at least) two participants and their cultures. Thus, no matter what one person does, the result can be defined only after the reaction of the other.

If a stranger does something that the native considers stupid, irrelevant or even forbidden, s/he may correct the other:

> Do not play with your spoon, it is childish!

says a British older woman to a Finnish girl, who absent-mindedly stirs her coffee and sucks her coffee spoon. The direct corrections, in fact, are rather rare. It seems to be a general rule in conversation that direct corrections of language or behaviour are reserved for parents, teachers, and alike, and cannot be used in equal conversation to a great extent. The people who constantly correct others are labelled as wiseguys and it is probable that a conversation with them is not considered a pleasure. But, as in the example above, is the rule that is given to the Finnish girl a *British* rule? Or is it a rule of older ladies only? Or perhaps of older stiff ladies? How can the girl know? Being a stranger, she probably considers this piece of advice as a part of a cultural teaching program.

Also, the other participants may be indignant. A Finnish girl refused an offer of coffee in an Arab wedding, and the father of the bride never forgave her. It is probable that heads have been lost because of such "trivial" cross-cultural errors.

Humour is, in many cases, an excellent way out of an awkward situation. Of course, it is better to laugh *with* the foreigner at the humorous situation, and not *at* him.

If one considers the errors from the point of view of interaction, negotiations seem the best way out of the awkward situations. On the basis of conversation analysis we know that the whole interaction indeed can be seen in terms of a kind of a negotiation. Participants have a stock of shared knowledge, and what they do not already share, they negotiate. Understanding each other is a far more complex thing than a mere interpretation of linguistic and verbal messages and problems of cross-cultural understanding are really seldom linguistic problems (see eg. Nikko 1991).

To sum up, it could be suggested that the focus of cross-cultural research should not be on the individual behaviour but the interaction as a process. In practice this means, that although we obviously need all these guidebooks for visitors, we also need guidebooks for hosts. Indeed, some consciousness-raising in cross-cultural matters would not be too bad for anybody.

The truth, and nothing but the truth?

All the stories and student experiences cited both in the present paper and in various guidebooks reflect clearly one basic experience. Experiences that come to be remembered and reported are not necessarily *true* from the point of view of cultures. They are true only from the point of view of the individual.

The reported errors and anecdotes can often be judged as false ones: that is, they superimpose a wrong idea of a language or a culture, a half-truth, or a misinterpretation. For example, an anecdote, which I have read in various sources claims that John F. Kennedy made a mistake with his German and called himself a jelly doughnut in a sentence of a famous speech: "Ich bin ein Berliner!" Although this interpretation of the word is possible, it is equally possible to understand the sentence as Kennedy meant it: *I am a Berliner*. It can be suggested that a great part (perhaps even the majority) of reported cross-cultural errors are such "partial truths".

That is, people who have not a full knowledge of either the language or culture in question tend, however, to explain some linguistic or other behaviour as if they had. They rely on partial knowledge, stereotypes, hasty interpretations of situations and so on. When I asked the students to recall their cross-cultural problems, many reported situations, in which their behaviour, to the outside analyst, was quite acceptable as such: the only thing that seemed to go wrong was that they could not handle the situation after they imagined they had done something incorrect. From the point of view of cross-cultural methodology this means that individual experiences reflect the individual's own interpretations of the situation in question, not real facts.

This is not to claim that cultures are static or uniform. There is no such actual person as a typical Finn. An educated businesswoman from Lahti is different from a Swedish-speaking fisherman from the south-western islands, and he is different still from a seven-year-old girl from Lapland, who is bilingual in Sami and Finnish. They all are different from an old farmer's wife from Savo. Age, social status, education and sex have an effect on the norms and rules of the group in question. People in cross-cultural situations, however, often have a tendency to imagine that a particular situation with a particular person is typical for the whole culture and adds this situation to his stereotypical image of the culture. Sometimes one gets an occasional inkling of such generalizations.

An example: it appears that Susan Sontag, an American, in one of her essays wrote that Swedish people have an odd habit of informing their company whenever they go to the toilet. Jörn Donner, a Finnish writer who has lived in Sweden (and who tells this story in one of his books), had read her essay and wondered about this statement: he had never heard any Swede make such a remark. He happened to know one of the persons Sontag was staying with, and he asked him why Sontag had thought so. "Well", the person explained, "there was only one toilet and as there were many people living in our commune, we always told when we went in so that nobody else would come at the same time". What was obviously very situation-specific behaviour was generalized to be culture-specific.

So, if anything, we should be taught to co-operate: to get information of other cultures, and also to inform our interlocutors of the oddities of our own culture. In actual conversations negotiative strategies are clearly best. If you do not

understand - ask! If you suspect you have made a mistake, explain and apologize. Accommodation does not mean losing one's identity, and politeness is universal, although politeness signals (verbal and nonverbal) vary.

Finally, it should be born in mind, that

To err is human - to totally muck things up needs a computer!

To err, to slip, or to blunder is not the dead-serious disaster it has sometimes been seen as. If you err - so what? As a human being you also have a capacity to correct the situations, and learn of your errors - computers still have something to learn in that respect...

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